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ABSTRACT

Teachers must be sensitive to the diverse cultures and the sometimes difficult personal experiences of Southeast Asian immigrant students. Varied conditions of arrival have a significant impact on their adaption to life in the United States. Earlier Vietnamese immigrants were more educated and Westernized compared to later Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees. The Confucian principles of filial piety, ancestral unity, primogeniture, and lineage influence parental socialization practices, and individuals strive to attain harmony in social relationships. The psychosocial development of Southeast Asian children is influenced by the conditions under which they arrived in the United States and by the tension between traditional and U.S. cultural beliefs. Unaccompanied males and Amerasian children are particularly susceptible to depression and behavioral problems. Younger children seem to adjust to the school environment more easily than older children, but language presents a major barrier for both students and parents. Educators can facilitate learning and encourage parent participation if they: (1) use bilingual teachers and school-home liaisons as resources; (2) become familiar with Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian culture; (3) identify the specific conditions under which each family immigrated; (4) ask all students to share information about native culture and exhibit respect for individual characteristics; (5) invite children to discuss problems privately; and (6) ask parents who immigrated earlier to help more recent immigrant parents to understand school policy and to translate communications. A list of 13 references is appended. (FMW)

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MEETING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN CHILDREN

Introduction

Central to the increasing ethnic diversity of American classrooms is the recent influx of Southeast Asian children (Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian). Since 1975, 800,000 Southeast Asian refugees have arrived in the United States, and approximately half are under 18 years of age. For these children to acclimate successfully to American life, teachers and classroom activities must be sensitive to the various cultures they reflect, and to the unique, and sometimes difficult, personal experiences they have had. This digest discusses the psychosocial development of Southeast Asian refugee children in an attempt to identify effective ways of teaching them.

Immigration History

There have been three primary waves of Vietnamese immigration. The first began in April 1975, after the fall of Saigon; the second was between 1975-1978; and the third, between 1978-1980 (Huang, 1989). The first wave of immigrants tended to be more educated and Westernized, relative to later arriving immigrants (Blakely, 1983; Huang, 1989).

Cambodians and Laotians left their countries under devastating conditions. Many endured boat crossings in unsafe vessels and experienced violence at the hands of sea pirates. They spent anywhere from a few months to a few years in refugee camps in Thailand, Hong Kong and the Philippines (Nicassio, 1985). Obviously, these varied conditions of arrival had a significant impact on the refugees' subsequent adaptation to American life.

Cultural Influences on Child Rearing Practices

Most Southeast Asian groups share cultural values that influence parental socialization practices. Chief among these are the Confucian principles of filial piety and ancestral unity, primogeniture and lineage (Morrow, 1989; Vernon, 1982; Yamamoto & Kubota, 1983). The principle of "pride and shame"—that an individual's action will reflect either positively or negatively on the entire family—is inherent within each culture. Children are taught to respect their parents, older siblings, and other adults in positions of authority (i.e., teachers); and individual family members are made aware of their place in the vertical hierarchy. Mutual interdependence is fostered from an early age, such that obligation to parents and family are expected to outweigh personal desires or needs (Morrow, 1989). This is in stark contrast to Western values of assertiveness and independence.

In the Southeast Asian culture, individuals strive to attain the Confucian goal of harmony in social relationships, and in life in general (Le, 1983). Southeast Asians emphasize the family as most important in their child rearing practices. A typical punishment for a betrayal of obligation to others is to lock the child out of the house, which shames the child; the child "loses face."

Psychosocial Development

The psychosocial development of Southeast Asian children is influenced by the conditions under which they arrived. Some children arrived with their parents, others arrived as foster children through Operation Babylift, and the rest arrived as unaccompanied minors (Huang, 1989). The evidence suggests that the latter, mostly males, are particularly at risk. They tend to experience depression and behavioral problems, such as tantrums, withdrawal, and hyperactivity (Huang, 1989).

Another group at risk consists of Amerasian children (with Vietnamese mothers and American fathers), who were shunned in their homeland and whose arrival in the United States has not been particularly welcomed. One factor that has contributed to the stress of Amerasians is their lack of a family unit in a culture where the family is highly valued (Huang, 1989).

Although some evidence suggests that younger children may adjust more easily to their new environment than older children, for many, psychosocial development is marked by the tension between traditional and American cultural beliefs. Cohon (1983) notes that children may be emotionally at risk if they do not make friends. However, the development of friendships (and thus increasing familiarity with American ways) may put them at odds with their parents (Ascher, 1989).

Educational Issues

"If you want your children to be educated, you should love and respect their teachers" (Vietnamese proverb, Boston Public Schools, 1990). Walker (1985) has noted that younger children seem to adjust more easily to the school environment than older children, largely because this is their first experience with formal schooling. Those who have had some schooling in their native countries need to adjust to different teaching and learning styles. American education tends to be more Socratic, as opposed to the more passive learning characterized by

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Eastern education (Walker, 1985). Thus, teachers need to be aware that some Southeast Asian children may have difficulty expressing themselves and being assertive in the classroom. Furthermore, parents' and children's respect for authority in general, and for teachers in particular, may inhibit them from voicing their views, as well as discussing any problems they may be encountering. This is exemplified by proverbs taught to children, such as "First you learn respect, then you learn letters."

A major problem encountered by school personnel and parents alike is the language barrier. It is not uncommon for official notices to go unanswered and for parents to miss opportunities to meet with teachers (Blakely, 1983). Not surprisingly, teachers and administrators often feel that Southeast Asian parents do not care about their children's education. However, the evidence suggests that parents are indeed quite concerned about their children's school progress (Bempechat, Mordkowitz, Wu, Morison, & Ginsburg, 1989; Boston Public Schools, 1990). In a study of working class (fifth and sixth graders) Southeast Asian and Caucasian children's perceptions of parent involvement, the refugee children reported significantly higher levels of parent involvement and concern over day-to-day progress, as well as greater control and supervision over after school time (Bempechat, et al., 1987).

A recent report of the Boston Public Schools (1990) indicates that Vietnamese parents see schooling as critical for their children's futures, but are accustomed to granting the responsibility for education to teachers. Similarly, Morrow (1989) reports that in their home countries, all educational issues (e.g., curriculum, discipline) were the province of school officials, and parents generally had little or no contact with the school.

Conclusions

There are several ways for educators to facilitate learning for Southeast Asian American refugees and the school involvement of their parents. They include the following (Keirstead, 1987; Huang, 1989; Morrow, 1989):

- Use Southeast Asian bilingual teachers and school-home liaisons as resources.
- Familiarize yourself with Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian culture.
- Find out the migratory conditions specific to each family.
- Ask all the children in a class to share information on their native culture and exhibit respect for the characteristics of each.
- Invite children to discuss issues with you privately if they aren't comfortable speaking out in a group.
- Ask parents who immigrated earlier to help more recent immigrants understand school policy, and to translate communications, if necessary.

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